

Grace medical coverage faulted

Beginning in 2002, most applying for asbestos-related diseases have been denied

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HELENA — Since January, W.R. Grace and Co. has denied most applicants to a medical program for people with asbestos-related diseases linked to the company's former vermiculite mine and mill in Libby, officials at the Center for Asbestos Related Diseases clinic said Tuesday.

"Up to this point, pretty much everyone who had been assessed and diagnosed had been accepted," said Pat Cohan, a registered nurse and program director for the CARD clinic.

Of the 27 people who applied to the medical program in January and February, Cohan said, 17, or 63 percent, were denied. Before this year, she said, she could remember only one or two people whom Grace had rejected.

Grace began the program two years ago, promising medical coverage for asbestos-related diseases suffered by former mine workers, their families and anyone else who had lived within 20 miles of the mine or mill for at least a full year before January 2000. The company required participants to have a diagnosis of disease that could be connected to asbestos from the mine.

Grace bought the Libby vermiculite mine in 1963 and operated it until 1990. Over the years, hundreds of people have become ill because of exposure to asbestos that contaminated the Libby vermiculite ore, and at least 200 have died.

Alan Stringer, a former mine operator who is now Grace's representative in Libby, said the people who have been denied coverage under the Grace plan simply didn't meet the company's criteria.

"There were some applications that were turned in that were sent back to the people because they didn't meet the

qualifications," Stringer said.

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DR. BRAD BLACK

But Dr. Brad Black, who directs the CARD clinic, said he thinks Grace has changed the qualifications, and long-time mine work-

ers who are obviously ill are being denied coverage.

"The evidence, and it's been stated by them, is that they're tightening up their program," Black said. To do so, he said, the company is relying heavily on reports from special X-ray readers, who often disagree despite their advanced qualifications.

"They're just using images to sort people in and out," he said. "They've excluded workers who worked there in the dirtiest times for 10 or 15 years."

More than 1,000 patients

who showed some sign of lung abnormalities on an X-ray have come to the CARD clinic for follow-up, and about 850 have been diagnosed with an asbestos-related illness, Black said. Some patients' history of exposure makes a diagnosis certain, even if only one of the X-ray readers could see a problem, he said. Because it can take decades for asbestos-related diseases to appear, a small shadow on an X-ray could be a sign of serious disease in someone who was exposed to asbestos fewer than 15 years ago, he added.

"Our concern is this: They're not getting a fair deal, and Grace is basically stonewalling," Black said. "X-rays can be interpreted by even experts with varied opinion, and they still have to have a correlation with the patient and their exposure."

Stringer said that the company did not have evidence that the people who were denied had a disease that could be connected to the mine.

"The reports that were sent along with their application did not indicate that they had an asbestos-related condition," Stringer said.

Cohan said the clinic is working with patients to re-submit applications, along with more information requested by the company.

When the medical plan began in 2000, Grace officials said they would remain committed to the plan regardless of price. At the time, they expected between 200 and 400 people to enroll. Cohan said there are probably more than 500 people enrolled in Libby alone. She said she did not know how many others are enrolled nationwide.

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